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**Death, Dying and Bereavement
in Sweden and Norway**

A Comparative Study

Death, Dying and Bereavement in Sweden and Norway. A Comparative Study

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Abstract

In a research project 'Symbols of death' concerning pictorial symbols and epitaphs on gravestones in Norway and Sweden, the focus has been on the 1990s and the 2000s. Individual symbols have increased especially in Sweden while Norway has saved more of earlier traditions of collective character. Secular motifs have been more evident on the gravestones in Sweden than in Norway. Another case study is concentrated on collective rituals around sudden death. Commemoration of deaths in traffic accidents have assumed similar features in Norway and Sweden. In these rapid sorrow situations it has not been current to mark individual traits in Sweden but instead emphasize collective manifestations that is in accordance with Norwegian traditions. The all-inclusive issue in my studies of memorial websites on the Internet concerns how mourners express their emotions, experiences and concepts of belief regarding the deceased person. The concept that the deceased is somewhere in heaven is very common. Belief in angels occurs very often in the messages.

Key words

Collective rituals, individual symbols, memorial sites, national comparisons, tradition.

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1. Introduction

In the 2000s I returned to study the research field regarding death and dying in another way compared with my earlier studies. My first studies were done in the 1960s and the 1970s and concerned social distinctions in old cemeteries and older customs and their survivals respectively disappearances. After the early 1970s I left the research field concerning death and dying for a long time. There was nearly a taboo about studying such a theme within cultural research. In the 2000s my stress has laid on the 1990s and the 2000s and the research perspectives have been concentrated on individual symbols, collective rituals and messages and beliefs expressed on the Internet. It became important to compare the situations and developments in Norway and Sweden as I since 1997 worked as a professor at the university of Oslo, Norway, instead of my earlier academic positions in Sweden, in the old universities in Lund and Uppsala. In the 1980s and 1990s I met renewed discussions both in Norway (Hodne 1994) and in Sweden about national characters (Arnstberg 1989, Daun 1989) but no national comparisons were done within ethnology and cultural history. However, I became interested in such comparisons. Through comparisons it may be easier to observe the characteristic traits between cultures and in this case national characters. From the end of the 1990s I worked within a Swedish-Norwegian border project with the title 'Cultural Encounters of the borders' (Danielsson 1999) and could, through field-works with interviews and photographs on both sides of the order¹, observe many differences between these two neighbour countries what I hadn't imagined earlier.

So my aim in this paper is to compare what has happened concerning death and dying in the two countries in recent times. What differences but also similarities can be observed on cemeteries, roadside memorials and on memorial sites on the Internet? What can be the causes for the differences? In the studies on the Internet the all-inclusive issue will be how mourners on the growing up memorial websites express their emotions and concepts of belief regarding the deceased person. Do concepts of a life after death exist and how are these expressed? Do concepts of a life after death exist and how are these expressed? What is the deceased's status considered to be on the other side and is she or he accessible in any way for the mourners? Can the dead be aware of and perceive the messages that the living send to them? Is any form of dialogue possible with them? Can the living at some future time after their own deaths be reunited with their dead loved ones and friends?

I will place the distinctive features of Norwegian and Swedish customs in relation to one another. Innovation acceptance will be contrasted with the

¹ These interviews and photographs are filed in Bohuslän museum in Sweden and Sarpsborg museum in Norway.

preservation of traditions. The aspects of individual indications versus collective traits will be important.

This paper consists of three Swedish-Norwegian case studies worked out within different research projects. The first part deals with symbols of grave-stones on cemeteries and is performed within the research project 'Symbols of death'. The second part regards collective rituals around sudden death and is worked out within the research collaboration among cultural historians in University of Oslo concerning different perspectives on rituals. The third part regards bereavement expressed on the growing up memorial sites for dead humans on the Internet and this case study is worked out within the interdisciplinary research network named Nordic Network of Thanatology (abbr. NNT).

2. Symbols of gravestones in Norway and Sweden in recent times

In the first case study I will concentrate on how dissimilarities between symbols on Norwegian and Swedish gravestones have been expressed and how one can attempt to explain them on the basis of different conditions in the two countries without, however, dealing with specific regional deviations within the countries. The national level will have precedence over the regional level, despite the study having been carried out in Norwegian and Swedish regions that verge on one another. Innovation acceptance will be contrasted with the preservation of traditions. Tendencies are studied in which one form of usage is more common in the one country than in the other, without, however, any determination of the exact quantitative degree of difference. This is in the nature of qualitative analysis which is a characteristic trait for investigations made by ethnologists and cultural historians.

In the 2000s the symbolic perspective became important in ethnological discussions about material culture (Naguib 2011). In a research project 'Symbols of death', concerning pictorial symbols and epitaphs on gravestones in Norway and Sweden and also objects, such as bronze figurines, fastened to gravestones, my focus has been on the 1990s and the 2000s. During this time customs became markedly changed in several respects. This is shown by the use of new pictorial symbols and by the frequent placement of objects in front of the gravestones together with flowers. The aim of the aforementioned project has been to interpret the pictures, epitaphs and objects as symbols and expressions or indications for human sentiments, thoughts and ideas (Gustavsson 2003, cf. Dahlgren 2002).

The source material used consists of 2 000 photographs taken by me on seventy cemeteries in Norway and Sweden. I have also carried out about two hundred interviews with family members on the cemeteries, especially in Sweden (see below), as well as with stonecutters and cemetery personnel on the visited cemeteries. I have attended ten stonecutter companies and their archives, five in Norway and five in Sweden. No attempts have been made to carry out quantitative evaluation; instead, a qualitative selection has been assembled through photographs of both innovative and traditional images and epitaphs in cemeteries. Observations recorded during fieldwork have given a satisfactory illustration of characteristic and deviatory aspects in the cemeteries. The geographical starting point consists of seventy selected cemeteries in an area ranging from Göteborg, Sweden, to Oslo, Norway, both in cities and rural districts, along the coast and in inland agricultural and forested regions. In Sweden this concerned numerous parishes in the province of Bohuslän, in Norway portions of Østfold County as well as the cities of Oslo and Sandefjord (map fig. 1).



1. The map shows localities and towns where fieldwork has been carried out in connection with the project 'Symbols of death'. Fieldwork in cities has taken place in several different cemeteries. The map was drawn by Torill Sand, Oslo.

At these fieldworks I found a greater willingness to talk about the personal grief than was the case in the early 1980s when I conducted fieldwork on a comparable topic. It is now obvious that people no longer are as anxious as before about expressing their innermost emotions both in Sweden and Norway. Openness has replaced earlier reticence. This is in line with what the Danish sociologist Michael Hviid Jacobsen has found within social science after the 1980s. Then themes around death and dying could be brought to the fore instead of the earlier tabooing (Hviid Jacobsen 2009).

I was especially interested in the new expressions for individual indications or personalization on the cemeteries. That means what the symbols may say about the deceased person, his or her life (cf. Dahlgren 2002). Individualism has been said to be a sign of our time, but how could this be explicit after death on the graves? The questions about individual characteristics instead of earlier collective traits began to be noticeable in ethnological discussions.

Taking society's restrictions regarding graves in Norway and Sweden into consideration, it is obvious that the 1990s have seen a greater freedom of choice for the grave's leaseholder as to the shape of the gravestones as well as pictures, epitaphs and objects on the stone. Liberal legislation sanctioning this measure was passed in Sweden in 1990². A comparable law was passed in Norway in 1996. This replaced previous legislation passed in 1897³. National regulation became standardized where local regulations and restrictions previously had greater consequence. The new legislation allowed for individual expressions on the gravestones to a far greater degree than had been possible in the past.

My first observation is that *visibly Christian pictures and epitaphs are more usual in Norway than in Sweden*, where judging by gravestones, secular and popular religious expressions lacking an obvious Christian character have a stronger position. The words 'God', 'Jesus' and 'Lord' or references to Bible texts are more common in Norway than in Sweden. This is especially true not only of Østfold County where evangelical and revivalist congregations abound, but also of the capital Oslo where the incidence of revival movements has not been high.

Expressions that suggest a reunion after death, for example, 'We'll meet again' are more usual in Norway. In Sweden such expressions usually apply to children's and young people's graves. In such cases it is, of course, more difficult for relatives and friends to reconcile themselves to an irrevocable parting. This Swedish usage on some children's and young people's graves should be considered as the expression of a diffuse popular religiosity.

² Statute on Burials and Burial Regulation of 6th December 1990. Svensk författningssamling (Swedish Legislative Compilation) 1990 no. 1144.

³ Statute of 3 August 1897, Norges Lover (Norwegian Legislative Compilation) 1996.

The worldly and the sacred are combined in Norway in an entirely different manner than in Sweden, where worldly pictures and epitaphs more often appear alone. A boat motif can often be found in Norway in combination with a religious text comparing life to a voyage. The text can read: 'Guide your ship in Jesus' name' or 'In the darkest night, Jesus' name shines like a beacon'. Eternity is then a shore on the far side of the sea. The darkness of death is lighted up by Jesus' name. A figure of Christ is not unusual on a Norwegian gravestone, and then often in bronze, but is almost unthinkable in Sweden. In coastal towns in Norway, the anchor motif can often be found encircling a cross (fig. 2). This is also the case when flowers such as lilies-of-the-valley or spikes of grain are combined with a cross. In Sweden, such combinations of the spiritual and the worldly are only seen in towns with a strong revivalistic tradition. Persons who have worked in shipping can in Sweden have an anchor or a freighter depicted on their gravestones. The stone can even be shaped like an anchor. A symbol of a boat that in Sweden has become an occupational or recreational symbol (see below), can in Norway often be combined with a religious text comparing life to a sea voyage.

According to my field observations, the cross has maintained its popularity in Norway to a greater degree than in Sweden during the 1990s and later. Continued regard for older traditions is widely accepted in Norway, as is the continuation of doing as one always has done and as others in one's surroundings usually do. The fact that use of the cross is more common than in Sweden should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of a more explicit Christian foundation but also as expressing an awareness of the importance of traditions.



2. An anchor encircles a cross on a gravestone in Sandefjord raised to commemorate a ship's captain and his wife. The pictorial symbol is combined with the worldly text 'In loving memory' placed at the base of the stone. Photo Anders Gustavsson.

Black crosses have begun to be more associated with death and grief, something negative, in Sweden rather than with a Christian belief incorporating a conception of resurrection, something positive and bright. Because of this heightened association with death and sorrow, lessened usage of the cross was observed during the 1990s in Sweden. Due to this conceptual modification, people have often felt that the cross has a somewhat dismal and serious character from which they wish to distance themselves in their encounter with death. Other symbols are chosen instead, symbols that express a more positive view of death. As an agent for a stonecutting firm stated: 'People don't want crosses nowadays. They fancy a brighter symbol. They can choose a sunrise, for example, to show that the deceased sat and watched the sun rise. Even a bird or a flower that the deceased loved, lilies of-the-valley, for example'. This change should not only be considered as expressing a growing secularization, meaning a reduction of religion in the public consciousness (www.ne.se Sekularisering), but rather depending of the cross itself being perceived as having a different content than earlier. The similar situation concerns obituaries where the cross after 1976 has been more and more seldom in Swedish newspapers (Dahlgren 2000) but are still used in a great extent in Norway (Wiggen 2000).

Crosses surrounded by beams of light, so-called crosses of resurrection, have begun to be the preferred Christian variant in Sweden, especially in revival settings. The cross of resurrection consists of a white, sometimes gilded figure of Christ whose hands are stretched out in a cross-like fashion. The cross can also be shown not as solidly black, but in outline and encircled by beams of light. This gives a much more radiant impression than the solid black cross. Crosses encircled by beams can also be found in Norway and then quite often in combination with a Christian text indicating a coming existence in Heaven such as 'Cast off the flesh, come to the Lord' on a gravestone dated 1993 in Enningdalen near the Swedish border.



3. A so-called cross of the resurrection on a gravestone over a couple who were prominent Pentecostalists on the island of Åstol. They were my informants when I wrote a book on the Pentecostal Movement on Åstol (Gustavsson 1984). Photo Anders Gustavsson.

It would appear that in Norway the next of kin are less interested than their opposite numbers in Sweden in commemorating the deceased by means of the gravestone that they have erected. Relatives therefore follow the beaten path of tradition. Next of kin in Norway usually visit cemeteries and study the stones and designs found there before making their choice. This has long been evident to both stonecutting companies and cemetery personnel. An agent for a stonecutting firm in Norway stated that 'people are careful not to break any norms. A cemetery is not exactly the place where they want to be conspicuous'. Relatives therefore follow the beaten path of tradition instead of finding variations that depart from what is normal.

Another difference between Norway and Sweden, that I have observed during fieldwork in cemeteries, is that one does not meet as many Norwegians visiting their relatives' graves as one does in Swedish cemeteries. It has, therefore, been impossible to carry out as many interviews in relation to the grave as in Sweden. Some of the about fifty Norwegians whom I have interviewed at other places than cemeteries, and who had recently lost a close relative, have said that visiting the grave itself has not been considered important. The memory of the deceased does not seem to be associated with the grave and with the care of the grave to the same extent in Norway as in Sweden. This does not mean that remembrance of the deceased is less intense in Norway but that it is not as strongly related to the grave as in Sweden. The clear Norwegian connection between the spiritual and the worldly can have significance. The deceased's abode does not need to be linked solely to the grave but also to a more indiscernible existence unrelated to the actual grave. On the contrary in Sweden the grave itself,

according to my collected field material, more often becomes the site linked to the deceased and to the remembrance of him or her. A factor that has significance is that surviving relatives in Norway oftener than in Sweden pay cemetery personnel to care for the grave. A burial trust is established and the relatives are thus freed from both any practical care and also any motivation for regular visits to the grave. A cemetery employee in Fredrikstad stated in the beginning of the 2000s, concerning the routine in this city: 'It is more and more usual that we cemetery employees are paid to take care of the grave. ... Burial trusts have become more popular in recent years. There are more and more of them. In other words, people pay money, for example, 10 000 crowns'.

A further difference between Norway and Sweden concerns the *use of occupational symbols*. During the 1990s, use of pictorial symbols for many more occupations has grown in popularity in Sweden, whereas this is more seldom in Norway. The horses and tractors that are popular in Sweden are lacking in Norway as are symbols for the various crafts. Other occupations, too, which occur in cities and small towns can be represented with a symbol on the gravestone. This is also common among workers and not only among the middle and upper classes. Although occupational symbols are not common in Norway, occupational titles are used there more often than in Sweden. Such examples are 'Captain' or something similar for those who have been to sea. This does not apply solely to high status occupations, such as teaching, building or dentistry, but also to shoemaking.

Modern *leisure time symbols* have had many expressions on Swedish gravestones during the 1990s and later. This applies especially to city dwellers. Leisure time or recreational symbols apply especially to the many masculine fields of interest, such as are sailing, leisure time boats, sports fishing or sporting activities such as soccer, tennis or ice hockey. Just as in the usage of occupational symbols, symbols for modern leisure time and sports activities have not as yet found a definite expression on Norwegian gravestones. The absence of explicit leisure time symbols should be seen in connection with the fact that individual expressions on gravestones and use of innovative symbols have not been as widespread in Norway as in Sweden. One has instead been more attentive to traditions and interested in preserving older usage. The grave has been an arena where relatives prefer to take the usage elsewhere in the same graveyard as a model and to make no effort to differ from these others. In other respects, certainly, leisure time, love of nature and various sporting activities, especially winter sports, have at least as prominent a place in Norway as in Sweden. Expressing this interest on gravestones has quite simply not had relevance.



4. A leisure time boat in coastal surroundings along the coast of Bohuslän with two gulls flying over the naked cliffs. The setting sun is associated with death. A gravestone from 1997 in Ramneröd cemetery, Uddevalla. Photo Anders Gustavsson.

In Sweden the next of kin usually submit proposals for symbols, epitaphs and stones, after which the stonecutting firm attempts to fulfil them. In recent years, one also finds examples from different social strata in Sweden of the deceased having expressed his or her own wishes for the gravestone. They think of their future memorization during their actual lifetime. This custom of the deceased making proposals as to what is to be done after their own deaths indicates an increasing personalization and a relaxation of a previous taboo against discussing death. I have not found any examples in Norway of the deceased having expressed any preferences concerning the appearance of the gravestone previous to his or her death. The need to emphasize the personality of the deceased does not appear to be as urgent as in Sweden. A collective way of thinking, in the sense of unhesitatingly doing as others have done previously, is still obvious. One might assume this to be a result of Norway having been a society with fewer social distinctions than Sweden. In a hierarchic and socially separate society, marking one's status becomes important and that is a characteristic trait for individualism. In Norway it has been more important to be equal to others, enjoy a good fellowship and emphasize the belonging to the common and independent nation that started in 1905 through the dissolution of the union with Sweden (Hodne 1994). This strengthens collective disposition and maintenance of traditions. Gravestones thus reflect the prevailing values of the surrounding society.

3. Collective rituals in recent times

In the beginning of the 2000s a research project on rituals was started at the Department of Cultural Studies, University of Oslo (Amundsen 2006). My topic in this project was to study collective rituals around sudden death in recent times. How do the nearest family, friends and acquaintances of the deceased cope with a sudden and unexpected death? How and why are new rituals created, how are they spread, and what meaning do they have for those people who are thrust into difficult situations? These are questions that will be discussed in this case study.

Ritual presupposes the performance of actions and the repeating and carrying out of these actions in a public social context (Klein 1995). The actions also have a deeper symbolic meaning for the participants.

The fieldwork, consisting of about twenty interviews, observations and photographs, was carried out in southeastern Norway and in the adjacent province of Bohuslän in western Sweden (see map fig. 1). Articles with reports in Norwegian and Swedish newspapers have also been important sources.

German ethnologists have studied the increasing number of *roadside memorials* – crosses placed along German highways – at the scenes of fatal accidents during the 1990s (Köstlin 1999, Aka 2007). The site then has a kind of sacred meaning for passers-by because a fatal accident has taken place there, and it also serves as a reminder to drive safely. The crosses then will have a preventive function. General religious and secular meanings can thus go hand-in-hand in contemporary society.

Roadside memorials of this kind have also begun to be found in Norway and Sweden in later years and nearly at the same time in both of the countries. In the light of Continental patterns (Margry 2011), increasing numbers of collective memorial observations and gatherings have begun to be held at the actual sites of traffic accidents. A cross decorated with flowers can be placed at a spot alongside the road where an accident has occurred. The sites of death thus obtain a symbolic content having a prominent element of spontaneity (cf. Petersson 2010).

The National Association for the Victims of Traffic Accidents, Hordaland in Norway planned to place signs marked with crosses at sites of fatal accidents along highways throughout Norway. These white crosses against a black background were meant to symbolize death. According to the association, they would warn about the continuously rising number of fatal traffic accidents and thus help to save lives. The cross as a symbol of death would, in this case, act as a deterrent. The Norwegian transport authorities did not, however, give permission for the plan. Instead, they saw the crosses as a danger for traffic safety because of their distracting drivers' attention (*Aftenposten*, 12 August 2000). Individuals and associations cannot act freely as far as public places are concerned. There are official, legal limits as to what can be realized as a collective memorial action.

A new form of remembrance has rapidly gained popularity especially in Sweden – crosses have been replaced at accident sites by brighter symbols, such as flowers, lighted candles, poems and photos of the victim or victims. Such brighter symbols will help to lighten the bleakness of the shock that has been experienced. The cross is more linked with death and sorrow in modern Swedish society, and to the darker side of existence in general but not so evident in Norway (see more about this above). Brighter symbols may fill a need for support in the severe situation of grief. Wilted flowers and extinguished candles have in several cases been replaced.

Friends of the victim(s) both in Norway and Sweden have also started to assemble in person at the scene of an accident shortly after it has taken place in order to give silent and collective testimony of their grief and bereavement. The disaster will be experienced as being particularly tangible on the precise site of the accident. Several instances of this new custom have been reported in articles and photographs in both Norwegian and Swedish newspapers. These gatherings are mostly arranged by young people who place crosses, flowers and lighted candles on the site. Traffic authorities in Sweden, however, have reacted with unease to the new custom of the gathering of large groups of people at accident sites.

The same traffic accident may often involve the deaths of several young people. Quite a number of newspaper reports especially from Norway have showed how an entire community was stricken when the young victims came from the same area. This leads to acute despair involving the entire community. The solidarity of the local community has been very strong in such critical situations and been experienced as being communal. A collective sorrow has often been manifested in a local church.

Young people in Norway and Sweden have also started to adopt a completely new way of expressing their grief and sense of loss when close friends have lost their lives – they publish written messages on the Internet. This method serves to supplement the visits to the place of accident.

Commemoration of deaths in traffic accidents seems to have assumed similar features in Norway and Sweden. In these rapid sorrow situations it has not been current to mark individual indications in Sweden but instead emphasize collective traits that are in accordance with Norwegian traditions. There is no doubt that newspapers, especially tabloids, have been instrumental in the spread of these new rituals commemorating young victims of unexpected death, with their articles and photographs from the scenes of traffic accidents. Newspaper readers receive impulses that may be acted upon when new accidents are experienced in the future. Newspaper journalists have themselves witnessed the growth of new rituals for which young people have taken the initiative. Such collective actions are then repeated on later occasions, becoming definite behavioural patterns which are adjusted to suit new situations. Newspapers seek to publish such episodes even if journalists are met with reactions of ethical nature

from the young people, such as 'Can't you understand that we're holding a memorial?' (*Dagbladet*, 25 July 2005). The journalists, however, are not deterred, but take pictures of anything even if the scenes are emotionally charged. The newspapers do not construct new rituals, but their intimate reports on them contribute to their spread. The newspapers' clearly increasing interest in life's tragic occurrences has led to a noticeable change in attitude which indicates that such tragedy no longer must be kept secret. It can instead be commemorated more openly in public and in company of one's social group. This is a source for the establishment of new rituals on similar occasions. These manifestations of interdependence and collectivity can be repeated later in analogous situations. This aids the family and friends by showing that they are not left alone in their shock and grief, but have a clearly expressed network of social support instead.

Collective feelings of grief and shock affecting young people are expressed more openly both in Norway and Sweden in a manner that had never occurred before the 1990s. The private sphere has become increasingly public with newspapers becoming important actors. Solidarity and collective feelings have become important key words in the approach to traumatic situations at the expense of individuality and privacy. This is a precondition for the formation and later continuation of collective and public patterns of behaviour. In Norway you have no earlier traditions to connect with and in Sweden young people have learnt to manifest collective feelings instead of marking individual distinctions around death and grief.



5. A 17-year-old boy from Västra Frölunda in Gothenburg lost his life after crashing his car in this mountainside in September 2000. The next evening his young friends gathered at the site and placed there several photographs of the victim, flowers and numerous lighted candles and torches. Photo Anders Gustavsson.

4. Bereavement expressed on memorial websites on the Internet

Research on material obtained from the Internet has during the 2000s begun to attract attention in the cultural sciences. This is seen by, inter alia, the articles in the annual *Ethnologia Scandinavica* for 2009 being devoted to critical questions about the Internet as a research source. Also of interest is the anthology *Digital Storytelling* edited by the Norwegian sociologist Knut Lundby in 2008. The Society International of Ethnology and Folklore (abbr. SIEF) published an anthology *Shaping Virtual Lives* in 2012 (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2012). The term "Netnography" is beginning to occur (Kozinets 2010: 60).

In this new research situation I decided to study memorial sites that I had observed on the Internet. These are a new form for expressing grief and for remembering deceased relatives and friends. Because the message and the imaginary conversations are published on the Internet, they are also accessible to outsiders, both acquaintances and strangers, including scholars. In my sample of memorial websites, I have studied those that are open to the public. I have avoided those that are available only to a limited circle or for which the guest must log on. Memorial sites have had an explosive development during the 2000s. In 2008 there were about 600 memorial websites in Sweden (*Dagens Nyheter*, 6 October 2008). My research deals with memorial websites that have become available during 2009 and 2010 in Norway and Sweden, with the most extensive material being found in Sweden. These memorial websites were set up by people who had recently suffered extreme grief in their immediate relationships⁴.

⁴ The following are the homepages for mourners which I have studied in Sweden: www.bloggtoppen.se/tema/sorg/ (theme/sorrow), www.efterlevande.se/aktuell.html (the national league of widow and widowers), www.evigaminnen.se/minnessida/ (eternal memory), www.hem.passagen.se/anglaforum (the angel forum), www.hem.passagen.se/anglaringen/ (the angel ring), www.kanalen.org/barn-i-minne/sidor.html (children in memorium), www.livetefterdoden, bloggagratias.se (life after death), www.metrobloggen.se (the metro blogg), www.minnesljus.se (memorial light), www.minneslunden.se (memorial grove), www.minnessidan.se (memorial site), www.mista.se (loss – begun in 2007), www.samsorg.se (SAMS cooperation for people in sorrow), www.smaanglar.org/ (little angels – organized by the parent association Little Angels), www.sorginfo.se (grief information – begun in 2005), www.tillminneav.se/showpage.php?id (in memorium, begun in 2006 and visited by more than one million people by 2010), www.vimil.se (we who have lost a loved one in the midst of life – begun in 2005), www.vsfb.se/main/page (a non-profit parents' association for those who have lost a child).

The Norwegian memorial sites that I have studied are: www.englesiden.com (the angels' site), www.etbarnforlite.no/Menysider/nyheter.htm (a child too few, set up by the association We who have a child too few), www.forum.smartmamma.com/showthread.php (smart mama), www.hvilifred.no/index.php?id (rest in peace), www.minnelunden.no (the memorial grove).

Although I have read messages posted on a great number of memorial sites, this study is by no means quantitative. Emphasis is placed on an analysis of the contents of the messages which stress a perspective of faith.

Conducting the study on a regional basis in these countries has not been possible, because the deceased's and the writers' residences are seldom noted. Nor has it been possible to gain any impression of the writers' social status.

The all-inclusive issue in this case study regards how mourners express their emotions and concepts of belief regarding the deceased person. Do concepts of a life after death exist and how are these expressed?

The concept that the deceased is somewhere in heaven is very common. There she or he can meet with others who have died and live together with them. Using messages in guest books, other mourners can express hopes that their various relatives will be able to meet one another even if they were not acquainted during their earthly lives. A new fellowship that is comprehended to be real and similar to earthly life, is assumed to have occurred after death. Deceased persons are believed to be able to continue practising their activities in heaven. Doubt or absolute denial of any form of existence after death is extremely rare in the messages.

It is often thought that the deceased can be contacted by the living and that these latter can even communicate their messages to the deceased on a computer. The technical possibilities of this life are, in other words, transferable to the existence on the far side of death. When the deceased are in heaven, they both watch over and protect their friends and relatives. The conception of a reunion with the deceased sometime in the future often appears in the messages. A new existence and fellowship can begin that will never end. Finiteness is replaced by the everlasting, and joy is restored supremely. This is something to look forward to as a consolation in one's state of grief.



6. Angels guard the stairs that the dead climb up into heaven
(www.tillminneav.se/showPage.php?id=.344).

Belief in angels occurs very often in the messages. In order to enter their world, the deceased must climb an unendingly long stairway that is depicted in some of the messages. The meeting with angels is described in a clearly positive context for the deceased. An expression that also is used is that the deceased was a gift or a loan from God. God and Jesus are mentioned more often in Norwegian than in Swedish messages, like the situation on gravestones (see above). This is especially noticeable in messages written by teenagers. When Trond was killed in a traffic accident at 15 years of age, three girls from his Norwegian school class wrote: 'God loves to pick flowers, and now he has picked the finest one, that's you, Trond'. Several other school friends mentioned God in their memorial messages about Trond.

A common concept is that children and young people become angels after death. This is in striking contrast to earlier beliefs when the deceased were supposed to be souls, not angels (cf. Walter 2011). In addition, there is a glorification of the deceased that is expressed by calling him or her the very best, finest or prettiest angel in heaven.

I have conducted a special study of memorial websites relating to *suicidal acts*. Such sites contain numerous distinctive elements compared to websites over other dead persons and also clear differences between Norway and Sweden

(Gustavsson 2012). The distinctive elements include criticism of the deceased, self-reproach among near relatives and friends, criticism of psychiatric treatment and repudiation of suicide guides. There are also some similarities between websites relating to suicides and those set up for other dead persons.

Despite their sorrow, sense of loss and shock, some Swedish statements and guest book messages show that close relatives find comfort in believing that the person who died by suicide can have come to a different existence after death. It is believed to be better than the life the deceased once had and consciously chose to leave. This new existence is, however, conceived of as being diffuse. These are not traditional religious conceptions. No thoughts of punishment after death are expressed. This corresponds fully with the neo-religious conceptions of 'the regained paradise' (Alver 1999, Kraft 2011). The surviving relatives are in Sweden also believed to be able to make contact with the deceased in the latter's new existence. Numerous messages mention the probability of a reunion between the surviving relatives and the deceased in some vague future. A glorification of the deceased often occurs in which the latter is seen as being the best angel that can be found.

In *Sweden*, the differences between suicides and other deaths have been increasingly wiped out. Equality, not differentiation, is to concern all, according to the dominant political and medial norms that have become increasingly strong. In order to achieve equality, former boundaries separating people must be broken down. As ideas of equal worth for all people have become the great ideal, this is also expressed on the memorial websites for the deceased. The belief in some diffuse existence after death, conceptions of angels and a conviction about the surviving relatives' reunion with the person they have lost through suicide in some distant future is consistent with what is expressed on the memorial websites set up for deceased persons in general. This same consistency is valid with regard to questions of glorification and honouring of the deceased.

Norway is more restrained when it comes to expressing oneself about suicide. In Norway the boundary between suicide and other deaths is marked in an entirely different manner. One does not encounter conceptions of an existence after death for those who have committed suicide. Glorification or expressions of honour are unthinkable, since this could lead to others being tempted to new suicides. A so-called emotional contagion is to be hindered in every possible way. In Sweden, however, there is a clearly expressed conception about how messages on memorial websites can prevent suicide in that they show the unfortunate effects this has on the closest relatives.

The Norwegian material consisting of memorial websites about suicide is quantitatively meagre compared to all that exists in Sweden. This indicates that the former tabooing of suicide containing elements of shame obviously is greater in Norway. Reticence concerning speaking of and writing about suicide is also noticeable in the media's presentations. In Sweden, too, the media long showed reticence about mentioning personal names and writing articles about suicide. The

death of the wrestler and European Champion Mikael Ljungberg on 17 November 2004 came to result in a clearly observable change. It is in this period of time that more and more memorial websites are established for persons who have committed suicide. Here there appears to be a connection with the increased openness demanded and shown by the media in recent years.

Even if equality and standardization have become the ideal in Sweden, there are also certain differences between the websites set up for those who have committed suicide and those who have died in other ways. This is shown by the criticism, and not only glorification, that can be expressed about those who have taken their lives. The deceased has caused extreme sorrow among the nearest relatives and friends. Criticism of this kind is even stronger in Norway than in Sweden. The words 'egoism' and 'cowardice' linked to the deceased are expressions that I have observed on Internet websites only in Norway.

5. Some concluding remarks

In the first and third case studies have differences between Norway and Sweden been in the centre. On the contrary in the second case study the collective traits and similarities between these countries are more evident.

In recent times memorials on the Internet have given the scholars quite new possibilities to investigate the processes of bereavement. The changes can be very different in different cultural but also national contents. This has been clearly visible when Norway and Sweden have been compared. Tradition is opposite of changes and this must be analysed in the light of different historical presumptions. Is the vision primarily directed backwards or forwards, in Norway respectively Sweden?

Former traditions have been shown to survive longer in present-day Norway than in Sweden. In the latter country there is a greater tendency to adopt innovations and to leave the long-standing. This relates to the symbols on gravestones. Memorial websites to the deceased generally contain more traditional Christian conceptions in Norway than in Sweden. In Sweden one observes more of a diffuse, general religiosity that reminds one of New Age modes of thought in which individuals and the brightness of a coming existence have a prominent position (Kraft 2011).

It can be difficult to give an explicit answer as to why former traditions associated with the deceased in general and to suicides in particular have a stronger position in Norway. One factor is the stress on individuals in Sweden. This is especially noticeable in the choice of symbols on gravestones in recent times. In Sweden there is often a tendency to regard what is new as being positive, to focus on the cheerful events. The result can be that one covers over anything that is sorrowful. Life's darkest moments can be given a brighter shape. In this respect,

Norway can be seen as being more realistic in its preservation of older traditions and in not merely rejecting life's darker sides without further discussion.

Internet

www.bloggtoppen.se/tema/sorg/
www.dyresonen.no (no longer in use)
www.efterlevande.se/aktuell.html
www.engesiden.com www.etbarnforlite.no/Menysider/nyheter.htm
www.evigaminnen.se/minnessida/
www.forum.smartmamma.com/showthread.php
www.hem.passagen.se/anglaforum
www.hem.passagen.se/anglaringen/
www.hvilifred.no/index.php?id
www.kanalen.org/barn-i-minne/sidor.html
www.livetefterdoden, bloggagratiss.se
www.metrobloggen.se
www.minnelunden.no
www.minnesljus.se
www.minneslunden.se
www.minnessidan.se
www.mista.se
www.ne.se Nationalencyklopedien [The National Encyclopedia]
www.samsorg.se
www.smaanglar.org/
www.sorginfo.se
www.tillminneav.se
www.vimil.se
www.vsfb.se/main/page

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